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ABSTRACT

News media and public relations professionals have a unique relationship that paradoxically combines both mutual reliance and mutual distrust. An exploratory study utilized symbolic interactionism and in-depth interviewing with news media personnel from four sites (a newspaper, a radio station, a television station, and a university) and a public relations practitioner to explore common ground and how the relationship has changed in recent years. Results indicated that localism, timeliness and unusual topics are common requirements in all media for public relations materials to gain actual coverage. Contains 17 references and a figure illustrating the ideal path that public relations materials take to pass gatekeeping tests. (Author/RS)

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ED 390 103

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RELATIONSHIPS, NEWS RELEASES AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Submitted to the
Public Relations Interest Group

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ABSTRACT:

An Exploratory Study of Relationships,
News Releases and the News Media

News media and public relations professionals have a unique relationship that paradoxically combines both mutual reliance and mutual distrust. This research project utilized symbolic interactionism and in-depth interviewing with news media personnel from newspaper, radio and television, and a public relations practitioner to explore common ground and how the relationship has changed in recent years. The authors conclude that localism, timeliness and unusual topics are common requirements in all media for public relations materials to gain actual coverage.

INTRODUCTION

The bond between the news media and public relations professionals has long been awkward. In some respects, the relationship is symbiotic in that the news media rely on practitioners to provide story ideas, while PR professionals often must receive media exposure to achieve success. However, the union is also sometimes highlighted by mutual suspicion of motives, distrust, and occasional animosity.

But the situation may have been altered in recent years. During the past decade, both print and electronic journalism newsrooms have been forced to enact budget cuts that have, to some degree, changed the way they gather and disseminate the news. Newsrooms today may be more likely to welcome story ideas from outsiders because they possess less resources than in previous years. It is possible, therefore, that the "gatekeeping" standards of news media are less stringent today than they once were.

News gathering and dissemination is a complex and important part of mass media in society today. The relationship of the news media and public relations practitioners is not one single reality that can be defined. There are many extraneous variables, such as ownership philosophy and advertising-editorial ratio that cannot be ruled out in describing the relationship between the two areas. This exploratory research project used in-depth interviews with editors from a newspaper, a news director from a television station, and a news director from a radio station to gain knowledge of how they handle news release materials. A public relations executive was also interviewed to determine his side of this symbiotic relationship.

This research project was designed to provide preliminary answers to the following research questions:

* Are newsrooms today more susceptible to news releases because of budget cuts or other reasons?
* Do electronic and print media handle PR materials in the same fashion?
* Why does one news release get published and not another?
* Do different definitions of news exist?
* How do relationships between reporters and PR practitioners affect use of news releases?
* Does an attitude of distrust exist at any level or on either side of the relationship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature is organized to highlight both the overarching conceptual framework for the study and some actual examples of past research that bare similarities to this study. First, the tradition of "gatekeeping" is introduced as a key function that news media serve in mediating between public relations practitioners and the ultimate public. The section also includes a brief overview of previous studies focusing on the generalized types of news release materials that pass gatekeeping tests to gain actual coverage.

Gatekeeping

The idea of gatekeeping began to emerge in the late 1940s social research of Lewin and others on human behavior within bureaucratic institutions (White, 1950). The gatekeeping concept points to the idea that the flow of news items is governed by individuals or groups who have power to determine what news will be disseminated or discarded. Various gatekeepers exist throughout the communication channel and news items like press

releases must pass through each gate in order to eventually reach the mass audience (Gieber, 1964).

Severin and Tankard (1979) note gatekeepers decide not only what information to pass through the communication channel but also how accurately the news items are reproduced. The researchers suggest this role is important because editors, reporters, photographers and other news professionals all make conscious decisions in terms of what information to use and what information to filter out. The actions of gatekeepers are also important, however, because emphasis of news items may be altered or distorted due to their subconscious bias, ignorance or carlessness.

White (1950) was among the earliest researchers to elaborate on this phenomenon, focusing on the gatekeeping activities of a wire editor at a middle-sized market newspaper. For this case study the author asked his subject, "Mr. Gates," to save every piece of wire copy for a one week period noting whether or not stories were actually used in the newspaper and the reasons for such decisions. White found that Gates used only one-tenth of the wire material he received during the course of the study. Based on the editor's reasons for rejecting stories, White concluded that Gate's judgments were highly subjective, based upon his own experiences and attitudes.

Gieber (1964) also executed several gatekeeper studies to find out more about the concept. In particular, he was interested in the origins of gatekeeper news judgments about what is printed versus material that is discarded. In looking at the subjective nature of news judgments, Gieber followed White's lead in utilizing depth-interviewing and observation techniques as his methodology. Gieber focused on 16 daily newspapers in order to obtain a deeper data base and wider understanding of the concept.

Gieber (1964) concluded that the gatekeeping activities of wire editors were impacted by the structure, operation, pressures and general atmosphere of the newsroom environment. Gatekeepers were not driven in their function by their own attitudes and experiences but rather, by the "task-oriented" (Gieber 1964: 175) pressures of getting copy into the paper and by the values of the publisher. Gieber thus points to the importance of the social structure of newsrooms as crucial in gatekeeping, perhaps equal to or even exceeding individual subjective judgments. Breed (1960) came to a similar conclusion based upon his interviews with 120 newsmen. He indicated that while subjectivity was an important factor, so too was conformity with the policies and typical news judgments of the organization.

Media gatekeeping therefore can be viewed as an intermediary function that serves to separate the public from the PR practitioner. Press releases and other public relations materials must pass the gatekeeper's test of news in order to be disseminated to the public through actual airing or publication. By trimming the amount of material available to citizens, gatekeepers make the quantity of news information manageable for the public, although it must be acknowledged that citizens may therefore only receive the news items that conform to the mediator's view of reality. Still gatekeeping provides a strong exploratory framework for the study of news dissemination.

News releases and the media/PR relationship

It is against the backdrop of gatekeeping that a number of studies of press release material were examined. It is notable that the majority of this research focuses upon newspapers. These studies attempt to determine how often print media use news release material and further elaborate on the relationships that develop between newspaper personnel and public relations practitioners.

Walters and Walters (1992) found that public relations output does not necessarily equal newspaper input. There appears to be an inverse relationship between the number of articles released on a topic and the number of newspapers that used the story. A multi-step, topic-specific campaign might give better results and thereby pass more gatekeeping tests than a scatter-shot littering of desks with mailed information. The successful public relations practitioners also had developed a reporters' network; they know where and when to send a story. When a story is applicable to a specific newspaper, they send it. When it is not, the PR professional does not waste someone's time on superfluous material. No matter what their size, Walters and Walters conclude that newspapers are swayed by considerations of timeliness in their response to press releases. To insure timeliness, many releases are sent by fax and E-mail.

Morton and Warren (1992a) found that releases specifically written for an individual's hometown newspaper successfully pass through more news gates than the 3% to 8% publication rate noted in the literature for releases in general. A sample of 196 hometown releases representing three months' worth of releases from a major comprehensive university was analyzed. Seventy-one (36.2%) of the releases were used. The presence of a photograph had no significant effect on whether a release was published.

Morton and Warren (1992b) also charted the use made of 197 news releases mailed from a Mississippi university to 121 daily and weekly state newspapers to determine the proximity of the public relations release source versus localization of facts in the story. The influence of proximity proved to be very slight, but localization of stories resulted in relatively higher use. They suggest that localizing releases may improve public relations practitioners' media relations and credibility.

Morton (1992) established that gatekeepers publish four types of press releases much more often than the other three. Consumer Information (24% publication rate) releases provide information to aid consumers in their decisions and activities. Coming Events (15% publication rate) releases announce and/or promote events sponsored by the organization. Practitioners write and release them before the event occurs. Research Stories (10% publication rate) summarize research projects conducted by the organization's personnel. Timely Topics (9%) deal with topics in the news. The less frequently used types are Past Events (4% publication rate), Features (3% publication rate), and Institutional Releases (less than 1% publication rate).

Turk (1986), in a study of the influence that public information officers (PIOs) for six state government agencies had on daily newspaper content, concluded about half the information the PR personnel provided was used in subsequently published news stories. The topics the PIOs identified as salient to their agencies were the same topics given salience in media coverage. Turk also found that while public relations information was used, it was not the major source of information on which gatekeepers rely. Fewer than half of all published stories that dealt with one of the six state agencies actually included PIO-provided information.

Moving from just newspapers, Harris (1961) surveyed 22 editors of top industrial magazines and analyzed 1,553 rejected news releases. The editors' criticisms of news releases fell under nine general headings: information (a lack of facts), timing (too early or too late), super-abundance (too many in a short period of time), novelty (items are not "new"), deception (products are not "revolutionary"), presentation (sloppy or poorly written copy), illustrations (multiple pictures or images), corporate image (editor becomes leery of the firm), and relevance (too many releases are irrelevant).

Work that analyzes electronic media usage of public relations materials has been more limited in scope. For example, 78 percent of television news directors reported their station use at least one edited video news release (VNR) each week, while 32 percent use two or more edited pieces (Sonneclar, 1991). On the radio side, Buckalew (1974) assessed 11 news editors' behavior in an attempt to predict their news judgment patterns. News stories that were timely and featured elements of conflict and/or proximity were the ones most favored by the radio newsmen.

METHODOLOGY

Epistemology/tradition

In a treatise outlining the foundations of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer (1969) acknowledges that his work grew out of the tradition of George Herbert Mead. Others in the tradition who have contributed to its development include John Dewey, W.I. Thomas, Robert E. Park, William James, Charles Horton Cooley, Florian Znaniecki, James Mark Baldwin, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth (Blumer, 1969). Littlejohn (1989) divides symbolic interactionists into two camps, the Chicago School and the Iowa School.

Blumer's analytic tool will be the form of symbolic interaction used in this project. Blumer is classified under the Chicago tradition, being the "foremost apostle" of George Herbert Mead (Littlejohn, 1989, p. 97). Mead is credited with providing most of the "philosophical tenets of symbolic interactionism" (Fisher, 1978, p. 165).

Three premises help outline this particular symbolic interactionism approach that is sometimes implemented by scholars in analysis:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them.
2. The meanings such things have is derived from the social interaction that an individual has with other people.
3. Meanings are not set in stone, but are modified through an interpretive process that the person has with other people and other things he or she encounters (Blumer, 1969).

In looking at news releases, this exploratory study sought to ascertain the meaning the objects (i.e. news releases) have for the various parties involved in news and public relations organizations. Utilizing symbolic interactionism as the theoretical underpinning of the methodology, the researchers viewed meanings from the perspectives of newspaper, radio, and television executives and compared those meanings with the meanings such objects (i.e. news releases) had for PR practitioners. Each person interviewed interacted with news releases and with others in the process of deciding whether the object found utility as a news product.

A self-report interview, using a semi-structured format, helped the researchers to determine if news media gatekeepers interpreted news releases in a manner similar to PR practitioners. Similarly, the authors attempted to ascertain how those involved interpreted the interaction between news practitioners and PR practitioners. Lastly, the researchers sought to learn how the individuals interpreted the process whereby a news release would potentially receive coverage.

Symbolic interactionism allows for flexibility in interpretation. In other words, what might be used on one occasion might not be used the next day. Variables that enter into the process include factors such as other stories on

the agenda, fast-breaking news, rapport with PR persons, availability of personnel, and potential coverage by other media outlets.

Each communicator in symbolic interactionism is performing a role (Fisher, 1978). In the revolving door of media organizations, an individual who is a gatekeeper one day may be a PR practitioner a few months later. Such was the case with those interviewed for this research project. The role one is playing has an effect upon the way a news release is interpreted; is one in a role of advocacy (a PR practitioner), or is one's primary objective to reach an audience with relevant, timely information (i.e. a news director)?

Design

Qualitative research is noted for employing relatively small sample sizes and in keeping with that tradition, research was conducted at four sites: a newspaper, a television station, a radio station, and a university. All the interviews were conducted in medium-sized markets. The newspaper, radio, and PR interviews were conducted in Toledo, Ohio while the television station was in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

A gatekeeper (or multiple gatekeepers) was selected at each of the media sites based on the following qualifications: the highest-ranking news executive who is (1) familiar with the news organization's formal or informal policy on the use of news releases and (2) familiar with the receipt and actual use or disposition of most of the news releases. The public relations practitioner was selected based on similar criteria in that he was the most experienced member of his staff.

This research project is similar in scope to Smith's (1964) study of 13 AM radio stations in Los Angeles. Smith interviewed the program directors of the radio stations to determine their programming philosophy and the control

of music on their stations. Like Smith, the researchers in this study were the principal "instruments" in the collection of data.

The interviews typically lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted on-site, in and around the interviewee's office. The visits allowed cursory observation of the news operations area to determine any relevant information about news release handling such as computerization, display, filing, and spatial relationships. In all cases, limited observation was made of some news releases received and the methods used for processing those releases. This observation is factored into the individual descriptions.

Because this study is based on multi-site interviews and observation conducted by multiple researchers, a list of key topic areas was used by each interviewer to assure continuity of subject. The list included the following key areas:

* definition of news
* interaction and relationships between gatekeepers and PR practitioners
* news release usage factors.

Interviews with the news and PR executive were audio-recorded and researchers also took limited notes. Recording interviews is standard procedure for many journalists, so the presence and use of an audio recorder did not appear to be a distraction to the interviewees or affect responses relevant to this research.

Data analysis generally followed the methods suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). Each researcher working independently coded their interview and documents that were gathered on-site. Next, within-site analysis was conducted by each researcher. Cross-site analysis was then conducted by having the four researchers look for conclusions from each

specific medium and the public relations organization through a review of the other within-site analyses. The cross-site analysis was completed by gathering the individual interpretations of the each of the four researchers and then drawing generalized conclusions to answer the original research questions.

FINDINGS

The public relations practitioner's view

Knowing what a news medium wants and needs seems to be a major key to passing the test of gatekeeping and getting news releases published or aired. According to Joe Clark, director of communications for the University of Toledo (UT), one of the best ways for PR practitioners to learn this sense of empathy is to have a background in the news business. Clark bases his opinion on not only his recent work at the school, but also on a 25-year career in public relations that included work with the Kaiser Organization in California and a stint as an executive of the Ogilvy-Mather agency in Los Angeles.

Clark says the media print or air about 65 percent of the University of Toledo's news releases in one form or another. He claims this rate is higher than for private industry entities, at least partially because the school is a public institution where the community's kids are educated and taxpayer dollars are spent, thus making it more newsworthy.

Clark's public relations staff disseminates different types of news releases. "Hometown releases" are primarily written by student staff members and are targeted at the hometown papers of students who accomplish notable achievements in school. Such releases allow the university to claim some image benefit for acting as the setting in which a student shines. "If a student from Lima makes the Dean's list here, we will send a release to the Lima newspapers that says, 'Johnny Jones of Lima made the Dean's list

at the University of Toledo.' And this stuff gets about 99.99 percent pickup in these smaller papers. I mean, everyone uses about everything of this type that we send out."

Other more official news releases about university business or the administration are written only by Clark or another staff member and must get formal approval from above before being disseminated. Clark obtains most of this information from meetings and from his efforts to become included in the administration's information loop.

But how does Clark decide whether a story is newsworthy or not? He looks first for stories that are interesting or unusual about university students, faculty, and staff members. But, he also notes news must have a local angle so that the story affects the community or audience members can at least relate to it. Clark also rates the timeliness of stories as a factor in the newsworthiness of more "official" university releases, although he thinks this aspect of news is not nearly as important with soft feature stories or the "hometown" releases.

Clark's actual news experience as a reporter and his master's work in news theory clearly impact his sense of news. And, he believes such experience is important for any PR practitioner. According to Clark, a news background helps a practitioner develop not only a sense of what news is, but also a knowledge of the media and their role in society. "If you (PR practitioners) don't have a news background, you don't have empathy for the function that the news media is trying to accomplish. And then you get into this bunker kind of mentality that, 'Hey, they are out to get me. Why are they doing this to me? Why would they write a story about what was going on behind the scenes? It is none of their business!' Well, it is their business."

Thus, Clark thinks PR professionals with news experience understand the reason a release may not be used is often out of their control. "We know that what the news day is like is a big determinant of what you can get. You can have almost any newsworthy university story that would not get much coverage if you have, say a quintuple murder downtown. On the other hand, on a slow news day, you can get just about darn near anything published or on the air."

PR practitioners with a news background can also utilize their knowledge to target materials and cater to the individual needs of each medium. Ultimately, herein may lie the reason for much of the success that Joe Clark can claim at the University of Toledo. His department actively targets and serves radio, television, and print media on an individual basis.

For example, the "hometown" releases are perfect material for small local papers that often print the material verbatim because they have small staffs and trouble filling space. "Everything that they do has to have a local bent because that is their market niche. Well, when I send them something that says 'Charlie Johnson, whose mom and dad are Phyllis and Phil Johnson of 48 Meadowbrook Street, did such and such,' well that is news there. We've got students working here who grind out this type of stuff, and it gets used."

Also on the print side, Clark's staff tailors releases highlighting the activities of African-American students at UT to the minority-owned Toledo Journal. The local daily newspaper, The Toledo Blade, receives targeted releases with reporters covering particular beats sent specific material that pertains to their area of expertise. Clark notes The Blade runs about 90 percent of the releases his staff sends because they are careful not to bombard the paper with frivolous releases, and because most releases highlight activities at the university for which the public has interest.

Likewise in electronic media, Clark's staff works to meet the specific needs of outlets. In radio, his staff has created a radio news bureau from which stations receive news releases and also a rundown sheet of stories available on an 800-phone number. Stations may then call to receive taped comments of university students or personnel to include in their news stories. According to Clark, UT gets almost 70 such placements a week on small radio stations around the state of Ohio, providing immeasurable image benefit to the school.

Clark's strongest efforts at targeting media involve television stations. He has hired two former television staffers who maintain regular contact with local stations and have a knowledge of the types of stories that will be used on TV newscasts. The staff has changed the way it deals with television stations by sending very few news releases and only then by fax machines for immediacy. Clark notes that is a complete change from the days when his staff sent dozens of releases to local stations with little or no success. "If they are anticipating when you send them material or call that there is going to be some news that they can use, then you have credibility. If you inundate them with a lot of junk, they will tend to throw your stuff away."

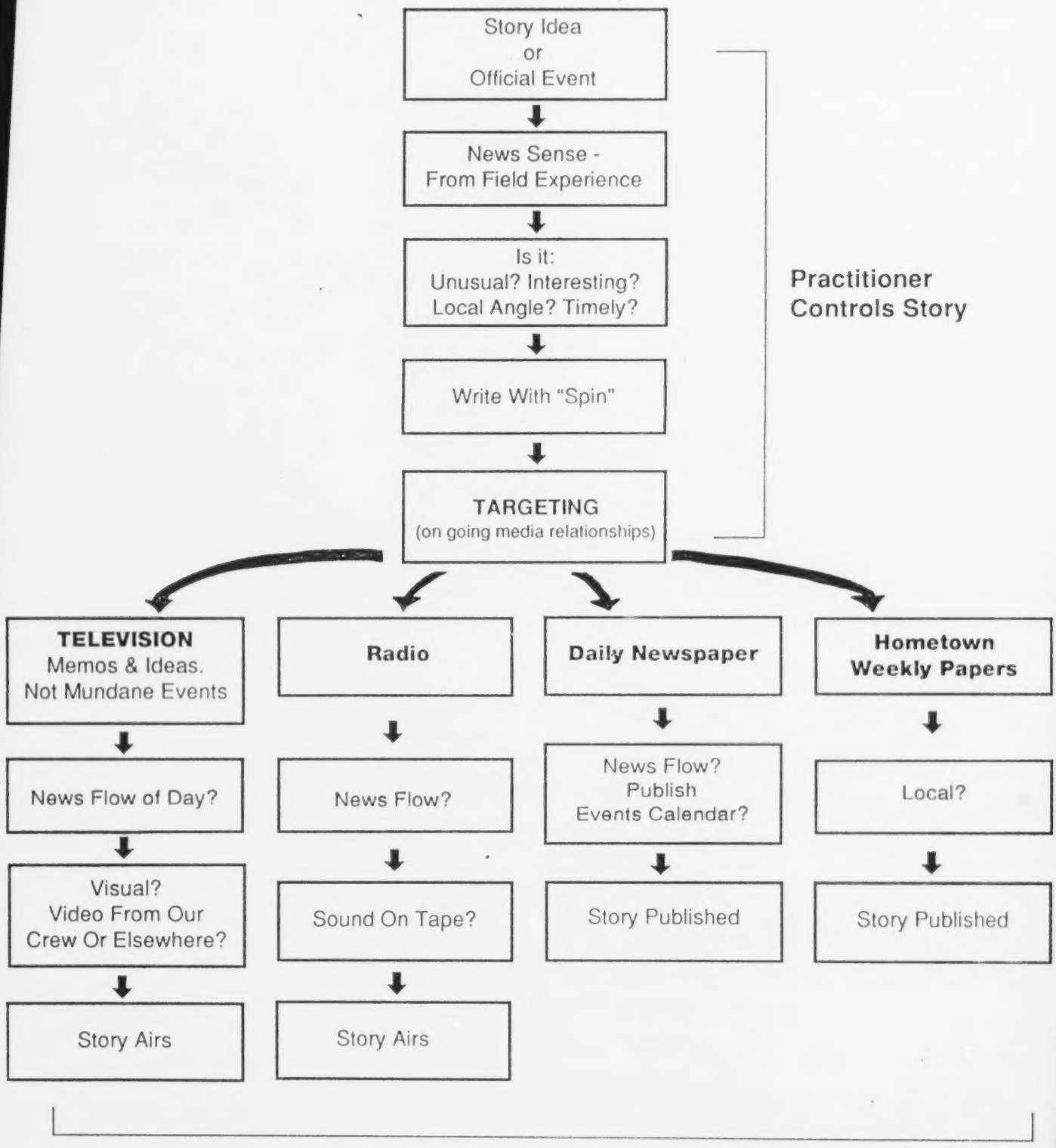
As opposed to sending traditional releases or VNRs (video news releases are prepackaged stories on video tape about the entity seeking coverage), most of the contact with TV stations centers on memos or notes that suggest story ideas. Then, stations will sometimes ask Clark's staff for information or assistance on that story. For example, if a station is busy but still wants to cover a story, Clark's staff may volunteer to shoot the needed video footage.

Thus, Clark thinks it is desirable for PR practitioners to have a professional relationship with members of the local news media. He cautions that PR professionals must walk a fine line and be careful not to infringe upon the ethics of news professionals by trying to develop too much of a relationship.

He views PR professionals only as working with, and aiding the news professionals. "Sometimes, I will get a call from the local TV news director and he will say, 'Say, my people don't think they got very good service out of you yesterday.' Service? Well, that is what we are, a service agency to the media. And that is good, that is exactly the way I want them to look at us. They know that what comes out of here is going to have spin. It is going to reflect the attitude that I want it to reflect. While we are serving the media, I will take the opportunity to put my twist on things, to see to it that the things that I think are most positive or most beneficial are highlighted. But they know that, too. Everyone knows what everybody is doing here."

The diagram on the following page summarizes Clark's view of the ideal path that public relations materials take in order to pass gatekeeping tests and thereby gain access to the airwaves or be published in print. In this graphic, a story idea must first filter through the news judgment of the public relations practitioner. If the PR professional can answer yes to the news questions that are posed, the story is written with their organization's "spin" on the material. The PR material is then targeted to a media outlet, based at least in part on the on-going service relationship that the PR practitioner has developed. To this point, the PR professional controls the story but now, control shifts to media outlets and the practitioner instead becomes a service mechanism. The story must then pass each gatekeeping test at the individual media outlet before it is either published or aired.

From Story Idea to Publish/Broadcast: The Practitioner View.



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Newspaper

An inverse relationship appears to exist between the number of press releases distributed and the number which end up in print. That "more produces less" is evidenced by the flood of public relations material the editors of The Toledo Blade receive on a daily basis. "Every day I go through close to 100 press releases," says Rick Maas, city editor. "We probably get a foot deep of mail per day. We have three news assistants on our city desk staff simply hired to open the mail and sort it." While Maas is inundated with news releases, a higher-up gatekeeper, the editor of The Blade receives an even greater volume. Tom Walton points to a waste basket already full of the morning's mail and asks if he can continue opening and discarding his remaining pile as the interview is conducted. "I get tons of releases every day that come from all over the country," he laments. "A great many are of no value to us at The Blade or to Toledo, Ohio."

Walton receives the greater quantity of PR materials because his name is listed prominently on The Blade's masthead. He simply routes the useful releases to the appropriate department editor. He recommends that PR practitioners make an effort to ascertain this person's name and send the release directly to him or her. "But most organizations will just send it to the editor and hope that that's enough," he says. "If they could see the pile of mail that comes into this office every day, they might do it another way." Maas, in fact, says some releases end up in the trash because an identical copy is sent to three or four different Blade editors. He, too, advises that a PR practitioner target a specific editor.

Both Walton and Maas say a follow-up telephone call from the public information officer to the department editor has some merit. "It doesn't hurt because it forces the editor to either say 'I have no plans for it,' or 'Yes, I will

run it,'" says Walton. "Unfortunately, we get so much mail that invariably when I get a call like that I have to acknowledge that the release may have come through here but I don't remember it." Maas, who receives 12 to 15 such calls per day, said their only value is to verify that the release was received. "It's very unusual that a call would change my mind about not running something," he says.

A release sent by fax to The Blade does not increase its newsworthiness, and can even be regarded as a nuisance. More and more public relations agencies are using this approach for its immediacy value, but it does create a certain logistical problem. "We have seen our fax machines tied up, sometimes for hours on end, by overblown news releases attached to speeches that somebody's CEO made," Walton said. "We have to wait for the last page to move before we can send something out."

In deciding whether to publish or reject a press release, the gatekeepers at The Blade rely on the same criteria with which they evaluate any news story. The item's unusualness, its importance, its timeliness, and its reader interest are all weighted equally. Parsimony is another important element; a release should be written in a simple, clear, condensed style. "They should organize it so that as I pick it up I can spot the basics on it and the reason why they're sending it to me," Maas says. "The basic who, what, where, when, and whys are important. Bells and whistles, most of the time, will only complicate what it is that I'm looking at and why someone has put it before me. I have to decide, literally within seconds, whether this piece of paper is something that our readers are interested in." The Blade's policy, furthermore, is that all releases must be rewritten by a staff member prior to publication. Smaller newspapers, as a rule, typically run them verbatim because of leaner staffs.

The Blade makes a concerted effort to accommodate most local releases, providing they contain a news peg. This accommodation can take the form of a story, a mention in the newspaper's upcoming events calendar, or a phone call from a reporter to the sender. Releases stating that "Joe Doakes was a delegate to his insurance company's convention in Tampa, Florida," or that "Charles Smith, a 1992 graduate of Woodward High School, has been inducted into the U.S. Army," are not published. If the release describes an upcoming event or activity, it is placed in a "date file" with the day of occurrence circled. The Blade maintains a file for every day of the year, with each month color-coded. The folders, which also contain notes and clippings, are pulled on a daily basis.

In keeping with its gatekeeping role, The Blade may decide that some local messages are not worthy of dissemination to its readership. Maas cites the case of a Toledo business organization sponsoring a project for inner-city youth. While the newspaper printed a story detailing the venture, it did not emphasize the organization's involvement. "I felt it was more important to focus on what was going on instead of who was doing it," he said. "We did make mention of the group, but their marketing person was looking for more of a focus on the group rather than on the project. This person, obviously, was hired to get the group's name in the paper as a sponsor." Another time, after receiving a release, The Blade published a story on a group of Right to Life students who had set up a display of 2,000 crosses at the University of Toledo. When the group later stopped at Bowling Green State University, a second release was sent to The Blade. "I basically trashed it," Maas said, "because we had just done a story on them." Maas also recounted an instance where a woman called him and said her husband had donated $2,000 to the American

Cancer Society just before his death. "She wanted a story on it," he said. "I didn't see any public interest in that, other than her husband was a good guy."

Some PR practitioners attempt to cultivate personal relationships with the news media, in an attempt to increase the placement rate of the releases they produce. Walton says The Blade is wary of such efforts, but that he would allow an editor to accept a meal from a public information officer providing the editor could reciprocate the next time. According to Maas, though, if a member of The Blade has lunch with a practitioner, "we either go dutch, or I encourage my people to pick up the tab. If anybody is going to pick up the tab, I insist on us doing it." Occasionally, The Blade must deal with public relations agencies or groups sending unsolicited gifts to the office. Maas recalls an all-star men's and women's bowling team delivering a fruit basket to the sports department, when he was sports editor. After deliberating for a day whether he should attempt to send it back, Maas put the fruit basket out for the sports staff to enjoy. Other items given to The Blade are sold at discounted prices to staff members, with the proceeds going to a local charity.

In summary according to the gatekeepers at The Toledo Blade, to achieve maximum placement of their releases, public relations practitioners should: (1) limit them to one page, focusing on the essential information; (2) emphasize the local angle and topicality; (3) route their material directly to the appropriate editor; (4) avoid sending duplicate copies throughout the newsroom; (5) resist the temptation to send material by fax; (6) call the appropriate editor to make sure the release was received; and (7) realize that the news media have an inherent suspicion of practitioners' motives.

Radio

Radio news, at least at news/talk AM station WSPD and adult contemporary WLQR-FM in Toledo, is "now." The view of veteran news

director Dave Brannon is that radio news must emphasize current information. Brannon says, "We don't concentrate on trying to expand certain stories; we're looking at things that are going on as we speak." This news philosophy has a definite impact on the use of news releases at these two radio stations.

Brannon's definition of a usable news release would be something that has immediate importance to the listeners or would be announcing something that is coming up. Based on this definition and his news philosophy, Brannon estimates that perhaps 90 percent of news releases do not pass his gatekeeping test and are not used, at least not directly. But many of the non-aired items are put into background files or passed on to other parts of the programming operation: talk shows, public service, or community calendar.

Because of its immediacy, Brannon likes the fax machine as a news tool. While most faxed news releases are from PR firms on behalf of the companies or organizations they represent, Brannon considers the faxes from police departments and other agencies about updates on cases, arrests, charges, meeting agendas, etc. to be news releases. "We'll look at those to see if anything is on there we might want to cover." Brannon again pointed out the immediacy factor: "We had a body found this morning in Monroe, Michigan...those types of things. They'll let us know immediately, and we'll have a hard copy of information about it."

Before Brannon took the job of news director, the station reporters used news releases, 800 phone lines, and other PR material to meet their daily quota of stories. But, although each news editor/reporter still has access to all the news releases and audio feeds and can make his or her own judgment about what the news is at a particular hour, use of prepackaged audio from telephone feeds or mailed tapes is rare. Brannon says there is a concern about bias, that

the material did not result from a reporter's question and can therefore be suspect. He has used audio news release tapes for public affairs-type programs "in an emergency" once or twice.

As for the interpersonal relationships with PR practitioners, Brannon says that PR firms calling constantly can be an annoyance. Several representing local companies do call and are less a nuisance than the national firms that call with the audio feeds. Brannon says he tries to work with the PR firms, but often things do not work out because of scheduling problems and the immediacy issue. "We see the PR people as liaisons to the newsmakers. The [news]people doing the interviews do not want to talk to the PR flacks." Brannon also said it is frustrating to deal with PR people who will not allow themselves to be recorded. "Well, I'll tell you what I know but you can't record me." Brannon says that kills the whole process immediately.

Because of the differences between the different media, Brannon thinks PR practitioners might be more oriented and more responsive toward print. "Because print has more room, they see the impact of print more. More goes into a published piece. All radio needs is three or four sound bites."

One type of PR method Brannon likes is the telephone news conference. Senator John Glenn conducts conference calls with news reporters across the state, allowing reporters to participate efficiently. Brannon says this is easy to do; the reporters retain control and material can be edited quickly for sound bites.

Relating the staffing issue to news releases, the WSPD/WLQR news department has experienced cutbacks over the past several years. There are five full-time news people now compared to seven just two years ago. If the stations had more news people, Brannon says they would produce more

newscasts and use more soft news to fill in the casts. News releases not currently used might therefore get on the air.

Based on the interview with Brannon and observation of the way the stations' mail is distributed, the decision-making process about who gets a particular news release is not clearly defined. Mail is often incorrectly or generically addressed so the receptionist makes the initial decision as to where it goes. Then it is up to whomever gets it to decide if it is usable by his or her area, be sent to somebody else, or declared unusable and thrown away. With the workload and time factor, it would appear that material could be sometimes lost or misdirected in this process.

The timing of the interview was such that the interview watched Brannon open his mail and perform his gatekeeping duties; the process matched what had been described. Brannon's initial reaction to almost all of the news release material in his mail pile seemed to be that if the researcher had not been there to discuss it, he would have thrown most of it away. What was usable was deemed to be public services/community calendar material, not within his area of control.

Television

Roger Ball, news director at WANE-TV 15 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has been on both sides of the public relations-news media relationship. Having worked in news and PR in three different markets in separate regions of the country, his perspective is broadened even further. Ball compared his experiences at WANE-TV to those in other markets without probing on the part of the interviewer. The comparisons came automatically as he reflected on previous experiences in other locations.

Ball reflected on the relationship between PR practitioners and TV journalists. The Fort Wayne news director has his own working definition of

news, which is not exactly the same found in introductory college journalism textbooks. He defines it as "what people ought to know and need to know." When pressed, he says "ought to know" is the same as "need to know." In clarifying his explanation, he says a viewer may not want to know the President of the United States is lying, but may "need to know it."

As Ball talked further, his definition broadened as he refined it. In offering a second definition of news, he says it is "truth well told." By this definition he means that both sides of an issue may be offended by a good reporter. Objectivity is the key. At issue is not what is important to newsroom personnel, but to viewers.

Public relations practitioners in Phoenix, a much larger market than Fort Wayne, did a much better job of working with TV journalists than those in Fort Wayne, Ball contends. The second market where he worked, Springfield, Massachusetts, was also superior to Fort Wayne in that regard, he believes, although the two cities are much more comparable in size. Three reasons are given by Ball in his criticism of PR practitioners in Fort Wayne. First, most of the key people in PR are located in places other than Fort Wayne. Second, among the PR practitioners in Fort Wayne, local media outlets receive low priority compared to their other areas of responsibility. And third, there is a lack of creativity on the part of those who try to work with the media, as they seek coverage of mundane matters.

New methods of delivering PR releases to TV newsrooms have not increased the likelihood of coverage, Ball explained. The traditional method of releases being received through the mail are still more likely to gain coverage, he says. Most video releases and fax releases are ignored. Ball's feeling on the matter is that to send a news release by fax is a misuse of the technology.

Novelty is the key to coverage. "Proclamations are a dime a dozen," he says in explaining that a ribbon-cutting day proclaimed by the mayor is not necessarily newsworthy. What makes it newsworthy is visual uniqueness, i.e. having the mayor doing something unusual at the ribbon-cutting ceremony that will capture viewer interest. Ball's newsroom conducts two daily meetings as part of the decision-making process about what will and will not be covered. What will get covered is what is perceived to be significant to the audience. Audience demographics are considerably different from news personnel, Ball asserts. Most people in his organization are in their late 20s and single, he says. While they may not care what the local school board does, it does matter to the audience.

Ball advocates simple, clear-cut press releases giving the basic "who, what, when, where, why, and how." In addition to supplying a news director or assignment editor with a clear-cut press release, Ball insists that a follow-up phone call is vital. Care should also be taken that PR practitioners do not cross the line of acceptable practices. Ball says most news organizations he knows of put a limit of $25 on what can be received, with the maximum being $50 at one organization. Yet, along the lines of impropriety, Ball says he has been offered "the use of a car for a period of time . . . the use of a woman for a period of time," as an inducement for coverage of a particular story or issue.

CONCLUSIONS - A MEETING OF THE MINDS

This exploratory research project is certainly limited in scope by the small number of interviews conducted and the fact that data was obtained from only two markets of similar size. Future research efforts should include additional in-depth interviewing in a variety of markets to serve as a guide for the ultimate creation of a detailed survey instrument that could be

implemented with a probability sample of news and public relations professionals. The resulting data base, whether obtained by telephone survey or self-reporting mail questionnaires, and subsequent analysis would allow for substantial generalizations about the perceptions of news media and PR practitioners as to the value of news releases and other public relations materials, and the nature of the relationship between the two parties.

Despite limitations, the current exploratory study nonetheless provides some noteworthy early findings that can be researched further in future studies and that also may serve some practical benefit. In reviewing the comments of each of the news professionals and comparing those to the ideas of the public relations practitioner, one can draw some final conclusions as to areas of commonality. In so doing, PR practitioners particularly should be able to find advice on how to craft their news releases and how to form relationships that will ensure the best chance for their material to be published or gain access to the airwaves.

First, all of the subjects share some very basic ideas about the definition of news. Foremost is the concept of localism. Unless a story is shown to impact the community or be about a topic to which citizens can relate or have interest, the material will simply be discarded by the news media. Although this idea seems to go almost without saying, several of the news executives in this study mentioned receiving news releases or other PR material from national firms that had little bearing on a local audience; the material obviously was thrown away.

Extending this concept further, it appears that public institutions like the University of Toledo have an inherent advantage in obtaining news publicity over business and other private interests. As Roger Ball of WANE-TV noted, news is information that the public needs and ought to know.

According to The Blade's Rick Maas, reader interest is also clearly a factor that distinguishes news. In both these criteria that are related to the localism factor, UT would routinely rank above private interests. Because the school is funded at least in part by taxpayers, the public should know what is going on at UT. Also, given that many of the young adults of the community are being educated at the University and that it sponsors a multitude of public events that are well attended by area citizens, UT qualifies high on the reader interest scale too.

Clark and the news professionals share the concept that ideally, news release material should feature the interesting or unusual instead of the mundane. A limited amount of space or time is available for news and as was evidenced by the hundreds of news releases that The Blade rejects on a daily basis, and competition for coverage is incredibly intense. In an environment in which thousands of corporations, special interests, politicians, and government agencies are competing for the public's attention, it seems clear that to bombard media outlets with mundane news releases is a strategy that will yield no results. Instead, a much more selective strategy of sending news release material would seem to yield more credibility for PR professionals and much stronger placement rates.

Finally, particularly in terms of hard news stories, almost all respondents mentioned the idea of timeliness as a component of news. While Clark claims some "hometown" release material is utilized months after it is sent out, he acknowledges the need to inform the media of "official" university news as it happens. Because news releases take time to write and disseminate, it may well be that this form of communication is not ideal for informing the news media of important, breaking, hard news items. In these

instances, calls to media outlets may be far more appropriate, alerting them to a breaking story and a forthcoming news release.

While there was some basic agreement across all subjects on definitions of news, there was some disagreement as to how PR practitioners could best act in terms of getting the information to media outlets. Clearly, The Blade liked the idea of releases targeted to specific reporters, a strategy that Clark also highly recommends. However, Dave Brannon of WSPD/WLQR showed a definite dislike for the newsfeed by telephone that Clark utilizes. Also, Ball of WANE-TV spoke against prepackaged VNR material, something that Clark does not utilize in Toledo but has utilized in other markets while working in corporate communications.

Most of the respondents did agree on what constituted an acceptable relationship between PR practitioners and news professionals. All the news executives thought that it was appropriate and perhaps even desirable to follow-up with phone calls on releases, although Brannon was less enthusiastic than his colleagues about this practice. However, Ball was direct in requesting that he get localized assistance on stories from PR practitioners, particularly when they are able to offer him stories that have the "visual uniqueness" he needs to attract and capture viewer interest.

Therein perhaps lies the ultimate key for PR professionals in developing successful news media story placements; each media outlet and each individual news professional has slightly different needs and opinions about working with public relations practitioners. Yet, the basic definition of news does seem to hold true for all media, and the PR professional in this study was in accord with this news concept, too.

In order to get coverage a story must be:

* Local
* Interesting or unique
* Timely (if hard news).

News releases that do not qualify on at least a couple of these points will not be covered. Beyond that, the best thing a PR professional can do is find out how each media outlet in their market wants to be serviced, if at all. In order to gain publication or access to the airwaves, news media outlets must seemingly be treated on an individual basis. That seems to be precisely what Joe Clark does at the University of Toledo, and this strategy may be the reason why he has had such a successful career in public relations for more than a quarter of a century.

News media in this exploratory study clearly provided a gatekeeping function to their readers, viewers and listeners by filtering through a vast array of press releases and other public relations materials. It becomes apparent after talking to news professionals that if PR practitioners like Joe Clark want to pass the gatekeeping test, they must do so on the terms established by the media gatekeepers, even in an era of declining newsroom resources.

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